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THE NON-ALIGNED GROUP IN THE UN: CHALLENGE OR OBSTACLE FOR THE US?

*The third world is remembered only when
it tiresomely succumbs to famine or massacre,
or when it behaves obstreperously in the
United Nations....*

Charles Yost in an editorial in the *Christian
Science Monitor*, August 20, 1973

The non-aligned members of the UN have become a potent force in UN affairs, and the frequent anti-Western positions of this group are of growing concern to US policymakers. This paper examines the structure, nature, and role of the non-aligned states, with particular emphasis on the group's cohesion within and outside the UN.

ABSTRACT

The growing collective assertiveness of the majority of poorer, weaker, and very often smaller UN members is partly a reflection of their increasing resentment at having their vital concerns disregarded by the big powers. It also is a recognition on their part that numerically speaking, i.e., in terms of UN votes, they can exercise considerable leverage on political and economic issues of concern to them. Deeply ingrained feelings about having been wronged, combined with a sharply honed sense of practical politics, thus have contributed to the emergence at the UN of a group of non-aligned states which

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embraces most of the existing African, Arab, and Asian members and about half of the Latin American nations. These two factors also have served to reduce inherent divisions in this highly disparate group and to help concert the actions of member-states on many issues which impinge on the concerns of the big powers and the other industrialized nations. As a result, the non-aligned states have become a factor to be reckoned with increasingly when the UN, or one of its specialized agencies, takes up such issues as the environment, the law of the sea, terrorism, economic issues, disarmament, or the Middle East crisis.

On the other hand, the non-aligned group still is subject to internal strains and stresses, partly because of tensions between an Afro-Arab majority, led by a radical few, and a moderate Asian minority, and partly because of an incipient struggle for leadership of the group, presently held by the Algerians. Nevertheless, non-aligned activity in the current UN session, while far from exhibiting solidarity, has shown greater cohesion than ever before. This situation probably is due to the successful trade-offs which the Afro-Arab majority achieved in supporting each other in their campaigns against the white regimes of southern Africa and Israel, as well as the fact that the Asian minority and other moderates have been concerned about being isolated and have tended, therefore, to mute their unresolved differences with the more militant majority.

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While many non-aligned initiatives have a distinctly anti-Western, that is, anti-US, thrust, the group also has sometimes directed its barbs against the Soviets, and on occasion against the Chinese. In this context, it is well to note the extent to which the non-aligned have learned to play upon Soviet ideological proclivities, a development discomfiting to the Soviets from which they find it difficult to dissociate themselves. Before long, Peking, which continues to align itself with the most radical non-aligned element, may confront the same problem.

For the US, the activities of the non-aligned members of the UN have become an increasingly troublesome problem as they look upon this country as the principal obstacle to the type of UN action they seek in a number of areas, notably in the Middle East and southern Africa and in economic development. In this context, the US often finds itself also isolated as Western Europeans and Latin Americans, particularly the former, have shown a growing reluctance to stand up against the non-aligned. At the same time, this is not a case of undifferentiated hostility toward this country. On numerous occasions, the funding for the UN Emergency Force, reallocation of contributions to the UN budget, the fight over the Khmer Republic's credentials--to cite just a few cases, the non-aligned not only have been divided themselves but also many of them voted with the US.

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There is thus not yet a built-in majority against this country in the UN. Besides, the character of non-aligned solidarity is not unassailable. But in overcoming it, the US has had to expend an enormous amount of energy as well as political capital, which raises some questions about the vulnerability of this country to increasing pressure on issues of possibly vital importance to it. The fact remains that the interests of the non-aligned in the Middle East, the racial question in South Africa, and general economic development tend to place the US in opposition to them. The cumulative effect of such confrontations raises the specter of growing US isolation in the UN unless enough progress is made on these issues to satisfy the needs of an increasing number among the non-aligned.

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[Omitted here is the complete Study.]